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ABSTRACT

There is much that can be done in early childhood education programs to foster second language learning in young children. The research literature on early childhood bilingualism clearly indicates that children can learn two languages simultaneously without apparent effort, without cognitive strain or interference in learning either language adequately. Young children will learn languages best in an environment where the languages are clearly separated by persons. Caregivers can facilitate language learning by talking in an appropriate way to young language learners, as they do intuitively and spontaneously when communicating with a child, and by providing a stimulating and diverse linguistic environment with meaningful social interactions, including those with native-speaking peers. There is considerable evidence from ethnographic research that children from minority cultures learn better when classroom interactional patterns match patterns they are accustomed to, and teachers need to accommodate the child's expectations while gradually introducing mainstream values, language patterns, and interactional styles. Different kinds of classroom structure and teaching behavior work well with children of different language backgrounds. However, care must be taken that the children not lose their first language and culture. (MSE)

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Second-Language Learning in Early Childhood:

Some Thoughts for Practitioners

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Second-Language Learning in Early Childhood:

Some Thoughts for Practitioners

It is clear that children who come to the American school system from families where English is not the primary language are in jeopardy in our schools. Eight percent of all monolingual English-speaking children in grades 5 to 8 were classified as at least 2 years behind their expected grade level, but 29 percent of all children from non-English-language backgrounds fell into this category (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1978). In a recent study high-school dropouts among minority-language children, Steinberg, Lin Blinde, and Chan (1984) noted that individuals from homes where English is not spoken are almost twice as likely to drop out before graduating from high school than are individuals from homes where English is the primary language. If, in addition, the child does not use English as the primary language of social interaction, the likelihood of dropping out of school prematurely increases to four times that of English monolingual speakers (40 percent vs. 10 percent).

It is not easy for a child to learn a second language and function well in that language in school. The literature on second-language learning in childhood indicates that--contrary to conventional wisdom--second-language learning is not automatic for children (McLaughlin, 1984, 1985). For a child to acquire a second language requires a great deal of trial-and-error, creative hypothesis-testing, and awkward experimentation. Many children do not succeed. Especially in the classroom context, second-language learning is a difficult and frustrating enterprise for many children.

In this paper I would like to examine some conclusions that can be drawn from the literature on second-language learning in childhood. I will look at three topics: early childhood bilingualism, the role of input on language learning, and ethnographic factors. My focus will be on second-language learning in early childhood because of the increasing number of children from non-English backgrounds in day-care and early education programs. Practitioners in these programs have an excellent opportunity to promote second language learning, while fostering the development of the child's first language. If they succeed in this enterprise, children from non-English-speaking families will have a much better chance of succeeding in our school system than is now the case.

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Early Childhood Bilingualism

The research literature on early bilingualism consists mainly of case studies (for a fuller discussion, see McLaughlin, 1984). This literature clearly indicates that children can, without apparent effort, learn two languages simultaneously. There is little support from this literature for the notion that learning two languages at the same time causes cognitive strain or that learning two languages interferes with learning either one of them adequately. In many countries of the world, bilingualism is the norm, not the exception.

One of the findings that seems to hold up in this literature is that most successful results are obtained when the conditions of language presentation are made clear to the child. This happens, for example, when there is a clear distinction between speakers: the child's father speaks one language and the mother another. This "one-person-one-language" rule seems to enable the child to keep the two languages separate. If parents and other speakers mix their languages, using now one and now the other, more confusion appears to occur and the child has more difficulty keeping the languages separate.

It should be noted, however, that there are language groups in which two languages are used somewhat interchangeably by all speakers. In this case there is a base language--for instance, Spanish--with words or phrases interspersed from a second language--for instance, English-for rhetorical or stylistic purposes. This "code switching" does not appear to lead to interference between language, as research with children from such communities shows little confusion between languages. Greater confusion is likely to occur when speakers change languages unpredictably from sentence to sentence, or from day to day.

The literature suggests, then, that young children will learn second languages best in an environment where the languages are clearly separated by persons. Child-care practitioners who are themselves bilingual will promote language learning best if they avoid the tendency to speak to the child in a second language when he or she fails to understand in the first. Studies of young children indicate that it is better to use consistently one language and to try to promote understanding in that language by paraphrasing and using context than to switch over to a second language.

Another finding that is supported by studies of early childhood bilingualism is that children go through the same developmental stages in acquiring their two languages as do monolingual speakers of each of those languages. That is, a child who is bilingual in Chinese and English goes through the same developmental stages in learning Chinese (or English) as does a Chinese (or English) monolingual child.

This finding suggests that it is not pedagogically sound to try to teach grammatical constructions to young children. They will learn them in their own time. Instruction in grammar forces children to learn constructions for which they are not developmentally ready. Research indicates that such instruction confuses children and interferes with the natural developmental progression (Felix, 198]; Lightbown, 1983). Thus attempts by educators to speed up the learning process by teaching rules to young children are likely to be counterproductive. Young children learn languages by using them in natural communicative contexts. This brings us to the next topic.

The Role of Input in Language Learning

What can caregivers do to facilitate language learning? For years, since the 1960s, the prevailing doctrine among linguists and psycholinguists studying first-language acquisition was that caregivers do very little. Noam Chomsky, America's leading linguist, was insistent in claiming that the language to which young children are exposed is too "meager and degenerate" to account for the rapid progress that children make in acquiring their first language. According to Chomsky, there were too many false starts, hesitations, slips of the tongue, unfinished and ungrammatical utterances in the input to which children are exposed. In this view, children do not learn by hearing people speak; they learn because they are innately preprogrammed to learn language.

Since the late 1970s, however, researchers have been discovering that the speech to which young children is exposed is not "meager and degenerate." Most speech addressed to young children is well-formed by any criterion. Indeed, it is in some ways ideally suited for the child language learner. It is slower than normal speech, it is directed at the here-and-now. Speech to young children is simpler, shorter, and contains a more restricted vocabulary than does speech addressed to older children or adults. Caregivers seem to intuitively modify their speech to young children in such a way as to make it more easily understood.

Indeed, it does not seem necessary to train caregivers to talk in an appropriate way to young language learners. They do so spontaneously when they are attempting to communicate something to the child. Caregivers intuitively modify their speech, use nonlinguistic cues and gestures, and repeat and expand their speech when dealing with young children. Otherwise, if they speak as they would to another adult, the child tunes out and communication is disrupted.

Caregivers in the family or in day care or early education centers will promote language development in young children if they provide a stimulating and diverse linguistic environment. Gordon Wells (198]), in a large study of interaction patterns in the family that relate strongly to language development, found that one particular process was especially important. He called this "negotiating meaning." It refers to the collaboration needed in conversation to express needs, ideas, and intentions. If caregivers are concerned with negotiating meaning--their own and the child--they will do many things automatically to ensure that meaning is communicated. If, on the other hand, the child's utterances are left to fall without response, if there is little concern with communication, then language development will be slowed down.

Research indicates that language development is promoted when children are in a rich linguistic environment and have opportunities to use the language in meaningful social interactions (Wong Fillmore, 1982). Caregivers can use pictures, demonstrations, gestures, enactment, or whatever works to communicate information and to link language to context. But they need to recognize that language learning cannot occur if the children never use the language in meaningful ways. There have been numerous suggestions as to how this can be done, many of which involve cooperative learning where non-native speakers work together with native speakers to solve problems.

One advantage of using native-speaking peers is that this greatly increases the sources of language input that non-native speakers receive. Teachers and aides can only give so much time to each child. But if children are to have plenty of opportunity to use their second language in meaningful ways, they need to be able to interact with as many native speakers as possible and receive as much feedback as they can in their communicative attempts. This consideration argues strongly for classes taht contain a balance of native and non-native speakers. In fact, the opportunity to interact with native-speaking peers may be especially important for some children.

Ethnographic Considerations

In recent years a number of researchers have adopted what has become known as an "ethnographic" approach to classroom analysis (for a fuller discussion, see McLaughlin, 1985). The concept comes from anthropology and refers to a careful examination of the interactional activities of teachers and students. The ethnographer attempts to make explicit relationships and behavior patterns that members of a social group leave implicit. In the school context, this means examining the values and goals of the school and of individual teachers, and looking at what is taught and learned formally and informally.

A classic ethnographic study focusing on cultural issues in education is Susan Philip's (1972) work on the "acquisition of rules for appropriate speech usage" among school children at the Warm Springs Indian reservation in Central Oregon. By comparing interaction patterns in Indian and non-Indian classrooms and in the Indian community, Phillips was able to explain the Indian children's silence and non-participation in traditional classroom lessons. Philips observed that Indian children showed relatively less willingness to perform or participate when they had to speak alone in front of other students. On the other hand, the Indian children were more willing than non-Indian students to participate in group activities that did not create a distinction between individual performer and audience.

One of the goals of ethnographic research has been to identify ways in which classroom activities can be structured in a way that activates children's energies and competencies, yet does not conflict with school goals. An interesting example is the Kamehameha Early Education Program (Au & Jordan, 1981) with native Hawaiian children. Children from this background performed consistently poorly in the American school system, especially in reading. Ethnographic research revealed that in the culture from which these children came, narrative speech events were marked by "overlapping speech" and a "talk story" style in which narration was jointly produced. When teachers incorporated this speech style into their classroom routines, children began to make significant progress in reading and test scores improved markedly.

The method used in the reading program stressed comprehension rather than a phonics approach and utilized the talk story style. For example, in a lesson about a frog, the teacher began by asking the children to tell all that they knew about frogs from personal experience. Overlapping speech was allowed, and everyone who wanted to do so could contribute. After an interval, the teacher introduced some reading material about a frog. The students read this material silently to themselves. After the story was read silently, another round of discussion took place, with the teacher guiding the discussion so as to ensure comprehension. This method contrasts sharply with the usual approach to reading in which each student reads aloud and mistakes are publicly corrected.

There is considerable evidence from ethnographic research that children from minority cultures learn better when classroom interactional patterns match patterns they are accustomed to. All teachers--including those from the same cultural background--need to be conscious of the need to make accommodations to the child's expectations and normal patterns of interaction.

In some recent research at the University of California, Berkeley, a group of us (Wong Fillmor, Ammon, Ammon & McLaughlin, 1985) have found further evidence of the need to take the child's

cultural background into consideration. This research was concerned with second-language learning among Spanish- and Chinese-speaking children in 17 bilingual classrooms. We used assessment measures expecially designed to measure the acquisition of the kinds of language skills needed for successful participation in classroom activities. Our goal was to determine what aspects of classroom structure and teaching behavior had the biggest impact on language learning over the course of a year.

As we analyzed the data, it became apparent that there was no simple answer to the question we had posed. There did not seem to be a straightforward relationship between classroom or teaching variables and language learning. In fact, it was only when we looked at differences between children who were poor in their second language to begin with and those who were more advanced, that we began to find relationships. Specifically, the weaker children showed large gains in oral language production scores when they were in classes where they had numerous opportunities to interact with native English-speaking peers.

Further analyses revealed, however, that this was true to a much greater extent for Hispanic that for Chinese children. In fact, Chinese children who were poor in their initial language abilities in English and who were in classes where there was a great deal of opportunity to interact with native speakers did not show the kind of improvement we found in our Hispanic children. In contrast, Chinese children did well in classes where the noise level was low and where teachers kept the students on task. Chinese children tolerated distraction less, did better when they were in classes in which they received a great deal of independent help, and generally performed better the greater the time taken in class for teacher-directed instruction rather than group seatwork. The Chinese children seemed much more directly dependent on their interaction with the teacher than was the case for our Hispanic children.

Thus it seems that different kinds of approaches work best with differnt kinds of children. Spanish-speaking children seem to profit from the chance to interact with peers who are good language models. Chinese children profit from close interactions with the teacher (and aides). This suggests that one method to use in classes with many Hispanic children is to provide plentiful opportunities for interaction with native English-speaking peers. In contrast, rich and frequent teacher-child interactions seem to help Chinese-speaking children.

It should be noted that adaptation to the child's cultural background involves more occasional history lessons or celebrations that are intended to give children from ethnic minority backgrounds a sense of cultural pride. What I would argue for is a much more radical adaptation, where substantial adjustments

are made to accommodate to the child's patterns of language use and interactional style. This implies, however, that mainstream values, patterns of language use, and interactional styles are gradually introduced in the classroom, so that the child has the opportunity to move on educationally and function in the larger society. The point is not that one set of values or behaviors replace the other, but that children have access to both sets so that they can form from both their unique bilcultural identity.

Bicultural Identity

In conclusion, I believe that there is much that can be done in early education programs to foster second-language learning in young children. There is a danger, however, that in learning English, the dominant language of the school and the dominant language of the larger culture, children will lose their first language. If this were to happen on a large scale, it would mean the loss of a valuable national resource, bilingual citizens. On a personal level, however, there would be an even greater loss. Children would lose their ability to communicate with their grandparents and in some cases parents, friends, and relatives.

Nowhere in recent literature has this situation been described more eloquently than in a book that argues, paradoxically, against bilingual education. In his autobiographical book, Hunger of Memory, Richard Rodriguez (1982) described how learning English separated him and his siblings from his parents. The school authorities had insisted that his parents speak English--a language they could use but poorly--with their children. Rodriguez wrote:

> ...as we children learned more and more English, we shared fewer and fewer words with our parents. Sentences needed to be spoken slowly when a child addressed his mother or father. (Often a parent wouldn't understand.) The young voice, frustrated, would end up saying "Never mind"--the subject was closed. Dinners would be noisy with the clinking of knives and forks against dishes. My mother would smile softly between her remarks; my father at the other end of the table would chew and chew his food, when he stared over the heads of his children (p23)

Rodriguez ceased to speak, and even to understand Spanish, and so was cut off from his parents, his relatives, and his heritage.

He confessed that he continues to be "paralyzed by the thought of his parents' pained faces," but he argued that this was the price to be paid for assimilating into the public society. One wonders if it is not too steep a price--and one that need not be paid at all. A truly bilingual education is one that produces individuals who can talk fluently and comfortably in two languages.

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